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If This Is 1968 Over Again, More Popular Upheaval Is On The Way



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Mass graves, the criminalization of dissent, systematic slaughter glorified as self-defense, resisting students making history. Yes, the current nightmare does seem reminiscent of 1968, the year kaleidoscopic change burst forth seemingly everywhere at once.

On January 31, the beginning of Tet, eighty-thousand Vietnamese troops issued Washington a formal eviction notice, attacking all the major cities and towns of colonial South Vietnam.

Blasting through the walls of the U.S. Embassy compound, they killed two military police and holding off a helicopter assault for seven hours. Government employees arrived at work to find corpses twisted over the ornamental shrubbery and pools of blood in the white gravel rocks of the embassy garden.

They shelled the U.S. naval base at Camrahn Bay and threw open the jails in Quang Ngai city, setting thousands free. They marched nearly unresisted into the ancient capital of Hue and raised the Vietcong flag from its Citadel. They forced the U.S. to raze half the city to the ground at Ben Tre, which an American officer infamously justified on the grounds that, *“We had to destroy the town to save it.”*

After endless boasts of imminent victory, U.S. troops being home by Christmas, and the proverbial *light at the end of the tunnel*, the Vietnamese Tet Offensive proved beyond all doubt that a U.S. military victory in Vietnam was not in the cards.

Wall Street turned against the war.

In March, LBJ discovered his Vietnam policy had left him no path to a second term. Though elected in a landslide in 1964, four years later his “Great Society” had turned to riot and left him a lonely prisoner of the White House. Wherever he went he was besieged by throngs of outraged students taunting him with “that horrible song” – *“Hey, hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?”* No matter how many speeches he canceled or how abruptly he changed his travel plans he could not avoid being *“chased on all sides by a giant stampede.”* The people were firing the president.

Support for escalation in Vietnam had evaporated. Worried that fulfilling General Westmoreland’s request for 206,000 more troops would leave Washington insufficiently protected against the threat of insurrection at home, a Council of Wise Men told a shocked Johnson to cut his losses and withdraw from the war before it tore the U.S. apart.

By then 150,000 Americans were dead or injured and much of Southeast Asia had been annihilated by a U.S. military machine that could do everything but stop. On March 31 Johnson went on nationwide TV to announce his forced retirement: *“I shall not seek, and will not accept the nomination of my party for another term as your President.”*

Four days later Dr. King was assassinated for having publicly connected the dots between domestic racism and imperial war. A year to the day before he was shot he was widely condemned for a speech he gave before a crowd of three thousand at Riverside Church in New York City, where he did not mince words about the war:

“The peasants watched as we supported a ruthless dictatorship in South Vietnam which aligned itself with extortionist landlords and executed its political opponents. The peasants

watched as we poisoned their water, bombed and machine-gunned their huts, annihilated their crops, and sent them wandering into the towns, where thousands of homeless children wandered the streets like animals, begging for food and selling their mothers and sisters to American soldiers. What do the peasants think as we test our weapons on them, as the Germans tested new medicines and tortures in Europe's concentration camps? . . . We have destroyed their land and crushed their only non-Communist revolutionary political force – the Unified Buddhist Church. We have corrupted their women and children and killed their men. What liberators!”

A year later he was in Memphis to help striking Memphis garbage workers. The night of April 3 an exhausted and dispirited King was already in his pajamas and ready for bed when he received a call from Reverend Ralph Abernathy at Mason Temple, informing him that two thousand people had braved tornado warnings and a driving rain to hear him speak. “*I really think you should come down,*” pleaded Abernathy. “*The people want to hear you, not me. This is your crowd.*”

Dr. King got dressed and went out into the stormy night.

In the blaze of lights at the podium, he appeared nervous. He told his audience that if he were at God's side on the dawn of creation he would ask to see Moses liberating his people, Plato and Aristotle debating philosophy, Renaissance Europe, Luther tacking his ninety-five theses on the church door, Lincoln emancipating the slaves, and Roosevelt charting a path to the New Deal. But he would not dally in those times or places, he said, preferring to move on and experience *just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century*, when masses around the world rose up to say: “*We want to be free.*”

Dr. King, abandoned by militants, vilified by the press, stalked by death and the FBI, felt deeply grateful to share in the freedom struggles that heaped his life with hardship.

With the crowd shouting its approval, he bellowed that he had *been to the mountaintop and seen the Promised Land*. Brushing aside prospects of premature death, he said that longevity had its place, but that on that night he was not worried about *any* thing, not fearing *any* man.

A burning passion in his eyes, his voice rising to a shattering crescendo, he declared his last will and testament: “*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!*”

The next day as he was preparing to go out to dinner with friends a bullet exploded into his face, severed his spine, and brought him crashing abruptly down on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.

Reverend Abernathy bolted to his side, crying out to those in the parking lot below: “*Oh my God, Martin’s been shot!*”

Dr. King, a look of terror in his eyes, clutched uselessly at his throat. His head lay in an expanding pool of blood. Abernathy tried to comfort him. “*This is Ralph, this is Ralph, don’t be afraid.*” Reverend King, still conscious, his magnificent voice silenced forever, couldn’t answer. But Abernathy felt he was communicating through his eyes.

In King’s motel room, Reverend Billy Kyle repeatedly banged his head against the wall as he screamed into the phone for an operator. Dashing up sobbing from the parking lot, Andrew Young groped for a pulse, then screamed: “*Oh my God, my God, it’s all over!*”

Everywhere at once riots erupted and cities burned.

Three weeks after King’s assassination Columbia exploded in protest. President Grayson Kirk, alarmed at the growing youth rebellion, announced that in disturbing numbers young people *rejected all forms of authority*, which was just another way of saying that all forms of authority were increasingly recognized to have discredited themselves.

Hundreds of students promptly took over the university, hoisting red flags, establishing community government, and barricading themselves inside campus buildings.

They purloined documents from Kirk’s office showing that the university was secretly promoting classified war research and working to “clean up” the neighborhood by moving out its Black and Puerto Rican residents. Resurrecting the spirit of the Paris Commune, the students debated meaning and tactics, relaxed to Dylan and the Beatles, and celebrated romance. Two students even got married, escorted to the center of an applauding circle by a candlelight procession of fellow protestors.

Eight days into deadlocked negotiations a thousand blue collar police were turned loose on the defecting sons and daughters of the Ivy League. Attacking with clubs and brass knuckles, they rioted for three hours, smashing up furniture and beating everyone in sight while carrying out a bloody mass arrest.

One hundred and twenty charges of police brutality were filed against the police department, the most in its history. Echoing the recently assassinated Che Guevara, Tom Hayden called for “*one, two, many Columbias*” in romantic hopes of bringing the racist imperial state tumbling down.

Days after the start of the Columbia revolt, student radicals in Paris surged into the streets chorusing “*all power to the imagination,*” propelling France to the brink of cultural revolution and setting the mighty franc to trembling.

Spontaneously embracing and kissing in the streets, tens of thousands of students and workers marched joyously together through the capital, waving red flags and singing the *Internationale*. Demanding workers' power, peasants' power, and students' power, they announced the end of cooperation with soulless mechanization and bureaucratic arrogance.

On *The Night Of The Barricades* the fiercest street fighting since Liberation (WWII) shook the Latin Quarter as thousands of students marched in protest, overturning cars and trucks. The police attacked, beating them with clubs and rifle butts, kicking the rebels unconscious and dragging them through tear-gas clotted streets by the hair. The students fought back with Molotov cocktails, filling them with siphoned gas and pushing vehicles into the middle of the street to serve as barricades. When the police charged, the protesters torched the cars and retreated behind sturdier lines while building residents tossed down water and wet cloths to aid their youthful comrades fighting with cobblestones.

A veteran of the clash reported, "*I never felt the gas. I was never more alive.*"

In 1968, even Catholic pacifists were moved to a more aggressive style of protest. On May 17, what became known as the Catonsville Nine entered the Catonsville, Maryland draft board office and doused a pile of draft records with their blood, then set them on fire with soap chips and gasoline, a homemade napalm recipe gleaned from a Green Beret handbook. While waiting to be arrested, they prayed and watched the records burn.

At their trial they spoke of United Fruit Company keeping Central American land fallow while the *campesinos* starved. They told of the CIA overthrowing the elected government of Guatemala and replacing it with a reign of butchers worthy of Hitler. Father Daniel Berrigan told of his visit to Hanoi, of the merciless U.S. bombings, of the weaponry certified *improved* through tests on Vietnamese flesh and bone. He read a statement explaining how simple humanity required the destruction of the draft files:

"Our apologies good friends . . . for the fracture of good order . . . the burning of paper instead of children . . . the angering of the orderlies in the front parlor of the charnel house . . . We could not so help us God do otherwise for we are sick at heart . . . our hearts give us no rest for thinking of the Land of Burning Children."

In early June U.S. support for Israeli savagery caused Sirhan Sirhan to temporarily lose his mind. He had been just three years old when a series of violent episodes near his Jerusalem home scarred him for life. A dynamite bomb hurled by Zionists blew up a line of Arab passengers waiting for a bus at the Damascus Gate; a sudden burst of gunfire caused an army truck to swerve around a barrier and kill his older brother before his eyes; a British soldier

blown up almost on his doorstep left behind a severed leg in a church tower and a finger in Sirhan's back yard.

Nineteen years later Sirhan was living in Pasadena when Israel bombed and napalmed Palestinian refugee camps, subjugating what remained of historic Palestine in the Six Day Land Grab (1967), a sequel to the driving out of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in 1948, among them Sirhan and his family.

With his people tasting another round of bitter injustice, Sirhan watched Senator Robert Kennedy wearing a *yarmulke* on television and promising to cut off U.S. aid to Arab states while sending fifty new Phantom jets to Israel. Shocked, angry, horrified, he fled the television set in tears, covering his ears with his hands.

He scribbled in his notebook: *RFK must die.*

At his trial for the assassination of Senator Kennedy, Sirhan testified to the assassination of an entire nation:

"Well, sir, when you move – when you move a whole country, sir, a whole people, bodily from their own homes, from their own land, from their own businesses, sir, outside their country, and introduce an alien people, sir, into Palestine – the Jews and the Zionists – that is completely wrong, sir, and it is unjust and the Palestinian Arabs didn't do a thing, sir, to justify the way they were treated by the West.

"It affected me, sir, very deeply. I didn't like it. Where is the justice involved, sir? Where is the love, sir, for fighting for the underdog? Israel is no underdog in the Middle East, sir. It's those refugees that are underdogs. And because they have no way of fighting back, sir, the Jews, sir, the Zionists, just keep beating away at them. That burned the hell out of me."

Nobody paid him the slightest attention. In spite of Israel's constant provocations and attacks, Jews were everywhere portrayed as heroic, avenging victims, Arabs as congenital terrorists, and Israel's Six Day Land Grab as a glorious warding off of a second Holocaust. Facts were entirely irrelevant.

With hopes of a peace candidate now definitively crushed, all eyes turned to Chicago as the Democratic Party prepared to nominate Hubert Humphrey there as its candidate for the presidency. Eighty percent of Democratic voters had chosen to support either RFK or Eugene McCarthy in hopes of negotiating an end to the Vietnam slaughter. Faced with LBJ's vice-president heading up the ticket, anti-war protesters vowed to lay siege to the city as a prelude to what they somehow imagined might become a revolution.

Protest was out of favor in the Windy City. In response to the nationwide riots that followed Dr. King's assassination, the *Chicago Tribune* opined that "*Here in Chicago we are not dealing with the colored population, but with a minority of criminal scum,*" and urged Mayor Richard Daley not to be like the "*spineless and indecisive mayors who muffed early riot control*" in Newark (1967) and Los Angeles (1965). Daley obliged, ordering his police officers to "shoot to kill."

Loathing "longhairs," Daley refused to issue permits for protest marches, rallies, or sleeping in the parks. He ordered the city Amphitheatre fenced off with barbed wire, put all twelve thousand Chicago police on 12-hour shifts, and mobilized six thousand National Guard troops. He posted a thousand FBI agents around the city and placed six thousand U.S. Army troops outfitted with flamethrowers, bazookas, and bayonets around the suburbs. With police outnumbering protesters three or four to one, Tom Hayden told members of a New York audience to come to Chicago prepared to shed their blood.

As summer waned the Convention convened, and following days of dangerous cat-and-mouse games in the streets between police and protesters, a brownshirt riot ensued.

Shouting *kill, kill, kill*, a squadron of red-faced, blue-helmeted, club-wielding police charged out of a bus at full-speed and attacked a jeering crowd of onlookers outside the Conrad Hilton Hotel, beating, choking, kicking and macing everyone in their path, including medics sporting Red Cross armbands. Like maddened Samurai they mowed their victims down, charging again and again, leaving the battered bodies bleeding in the street. Loading them onto the ambulances, they beat them once more.

Eyes bulging with hate, they drove the crowd through the window of the Haymarket Lounge, jumping through the glass shards to upend tables and smash everything inside. They screamed "*get the fuck out of here,*" and "*move your fucking ass,*" beating even the startled patrons of the bar. Undeterred by the presence of live TV cameras, they rioted in clouds of tear gas for seventeen long minutes while the surrounding crowd chanted, "*The whole world is watching, the whole world is watching.*"

Across the street in his hotel shower Hubert Humphrey was briefly overcome from the effects of the gas, which he never was from the horrors of Vietnam.

When televised images of the bloodshed reached the floor of the Democratic Convention, Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff stepped to the rostrum to denounce the "*Gestapo tactics*" of the police. In an instant Chicago Mayor Daley was on his feet, waving his arms and screaming in protest: "*Fuck you, you Jew son of a bitch, you lousy motherfucker go home.*"

As the ballots were being cast, footage of the police riot was beamed across the nation. Viewers saw Hubert Humphrey, irrepressible advocate of *the politics of joy*, nominated for president in a sea of blood.

Of course, all this was but child's play compared to the unrestrained violence being inflicted on the *slopes and dinks and zipperheads* – otherwise known as the Vietnamese people – by the U.S. war machine in Vietnam. Two years later in Detroit, Vietnam Veterans gave chilling testimony as to the type of crimes being committed:

“ . . . they didn't believe our body counts. So we had to cut off the right ear of everybody we killed to prove our body count.”

“ . . . we threw full C-ration cans at kids at the side of the road. Well, just for a joke, these guys would take a full can, and throw it as hard as they could at a kid's head. I saw several kids' heads split wide open.”

“The philosophy was that anybody running must be a Viet Cong; he must have something to hide or else he would stick around for the Americans, not taking into consideration that he was running from the Americans because they were continually shooting at him. So they shot down anybody who was running.”

“This was common policy. Kill anything you want to kill, any time you want to kill it – just don't get caught.”

“ . . . the heads of the bodies were cut off and they were placed on stakes, jammed down on stakes, and were placed in the middle of the trails and a Cav patch was hammered into the top of his head, with Bravo Company's 'B' written right on the patch.”

“I saw during my tour 20 deformed infants under the age of one . . . I thought it was congenital or something, from venereal disease, because they had flippers and things . . . it was common knowledge that Agent Orange was sprayed in the area.”

“Fugas is a jelly-like substance. It's flammable . . . they explode the barrel over an area and this flaming, jelly-like substance lands on everything . . . people or animals or whatever.”

“You could take the wires of a jeep battery put it almost any place on their body, and you're going to shock the hell out of the guy. The basic place you put it was the genitals.”

In other words, the conduct of the United States in Southeast Asia during the war years was nothing short of a complete disgrace. Washington dropped eight million tons of bombs and nearly four hundred thousand tons of napalm, leaving behind twenty-one million bomb craters. It killed over two million Cambodians, Vietnamese, and Laotians, wounded over three million more, and scattered fourteen million traumatized refugees throughout Indochina. It rained down eighteen million gallons of Agent Orange and other defoliants,

creating forests bereft of trees, animals or birds, and cursing the war's survivors with extraordinary rates of liver cancer, miscarriages, stillbirths, and birth defects. It left in its wake eighty-three thousand amputees, forty thousand people blinded or deaf, and hundreds of thousands of orphans, prostitutes, disabled, mentally ill, and drug addicts.

The total effect was nearly permanent, as journalist Donovan Webster discovered on a visit to Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon) in the mid-1990s. There he saw a storage room stacked from floor to ceiling on all four sides with deformed fetuses, the final result of the Pentagon's defoliation program begun three decades before. Some were double bodies fused together on a single torso, others had malformed faces, many had excess heads, fingers, and toes.

Donovan walked out of the storage room in shock.

In a nursery down the hall, a roomful of genetically-damaged orphans was overjoyed to meet the U.S. reporter come to visit them from overseas.

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